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The CPSU and Its Members: Between Communism and Postcommunism

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Once dominant and unchallenged throughout the USSR, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union rapidly lost authority in the last two years of Soviet rule. Banned by Russian presidential decree after the failure of the attempted coup of August 1991, it was re-established in February 1993 and soon became the largest of the postcommunist parties. A 1992 survey of current and former party members as well as other Russians found that members were characterized by a relatively high degree of activism. They were disproportionately male, more affluent than non-members, and better provided with consumer goods. Younger respondents and religious believers were more likely to have left the party than their older colleagues. Those who still regarded themselves as party members were the most likely to oppose economic reform and support the collectivist principles of the communist era, particularly if they were activists; but the differences between members and non-members were not substantial, and both were found to hold generally pessimistic views on the postcommunist system. These findings suggest that, although former members will continue to be influential, CPSU membership is by itself likely to play a limited part in shaping the political direction of postcommunist Russia.

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union was the dominant institution within the political system over which it presided. Indeed, for many, it was in fact itself the system, its 'central and defining characteristic'.[1] Its ideology was mandatory in public life, including education and culture, and could not legitimately be challenged. The party enjoyed an effective electoral monopoly, and, after 1977, a formal monopoly of political initiative through Article 6 of the Constitution, which described it as the 'leading and guiding force of Soviet society [and] the nucleus of its political system'. The party exercised a dominant influence in the soviets at all levels through the party groups that were active within them, and which (to quote the party rules) were 'strictly and unswervingly bound by the decisions' of the CPSU hierarchy. The key power of appointment was reserved for party committees through the *nomenklatura* system. Party members were well represented at all levels of society, with about 10 per cent of adults, a third

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[1] Ronald J. Hill in Stephen White, Alex Pravda and Zvi Gitelman, eds, *Developments in Soviet Politics* (London: Macmillan and Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 86.

of all urban males and a third of all college graduates within its ranks.[2] The party controlled the mass media, and in the last resort it could bring its influence to bear through the law courts, the police or the armed forces. No wonder, perhaps, that an *émigré* of the 1970s was reduced to a Biblical metaphor: 'the party', he explained, 'is like God: it's everywhere'.[3]

By the end of 1991, after a dramatic process of political change throughout the communist world, there was no longer a ruling Communist Party or indeed a Soviet Union. The party had initiated *perestroika*, but had itself been very slow to reflect the process of democratization that had transformed the representative system, government and citizen politics. There had certainly been formal changes in its position, with the ending of the constitutionally guaranteed monopoly in 1990 and a series of modifications to the party rules designed to increase the rights of ordinary members. Yet the process of democratization served in the end to undermine the position of the ruling party that had initiated it. At the largely competitive elections of 1989, and again in 1990, party officials suffered heavy losses. *Glasnost'* exposed the party's misgovernment to public scrutiny. A civil society began to form outside the framework of party dominance, first as 'informals' and then as independent parties (which were able to operate on a legal basis from October 1990). The party began to split; members began to leave; its finances began to crumble. The attempted coup of 1991, in which its leadership appeared to be implicated, was the final blow. Gorbachev resigned from the leadership and called for the Central Committee to dissolve itself; the Russian president Boris Yeltsin suspended the party and then banned it altogether; and the party's buildings and assets were taken into state ownership.[4]

A year or two later, it was less clear that the CPSU had vanished into the 'dustbin of history' or that it had lost the political dominance it had enjoyed for more than seventy years. The Russian government was certainly a non-communist one, but it was predominantly composed of former members: Yeltsin himself, nearly thirty years in the party's ranks, had been a member of its Secretariat and Politburo, and Prime Minister Chernomyrdin had been a member of the Central Committee. In the former republics first secretaries like Leonid

[2] See Jerry F. Hough, 'Party Saturation in the Soviet Union', in Hough, *The Soviet Union and Social Science Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 125–39.

[3] Quoted in Aryeh L. Unger, 'Images of the CPSU', *Survey*, 23, no. 4 (1977–8), 23–34, p. 24.

[4] On the party's final stages see for instance Ronald J. Hill, 'The CPSU: Decline and Collapse', *Irish Slavonic Studies*, no. 12 (1991), 97–120; Hill, 'The CPSU: From Monolith to Pluralist?', *Soviet Studies*, 43 (1991), 217–35; Stephen White, 'Rethinking the CPSU', *Soviet Studies*, 43 (1991), 405–28; Bohdan Harasymiw, 'Changes in the Party's Composition: The "Destroyka" of the CPSU', *Journal of Communist Studies*, 7, no. 2 (June 1991), 133–60; Neil Robinson, 'Gorbachev and the Place of the Party in Soviet Reform, 1985–91', *Soviet Studies*, 44 (1992), 423–44; Rita di Leo, 'The Soviet Communist Party 1988–91: From Power to Ostracism', *Coexistence*, 29 (1992), 321–34; James R. Millar, ed., *Cracks in the Monolith: Party Power in the Brezhnev Era* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1992); E. A. Rees, ed., *The Soviet Communist Party in Disarray* (London: Macmillan, 1992); and Stephen White, 'Communists and Their Party in the Late Soviet Period', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 72 (1994), 644–63.

Kravchuk, Islam Karimov and Nursultan Nazarbaev had become the elected presidents of sovereign states, and sometimes headed post-communist ruling parties. At local level an estimated 80–90 per cent of executive positions were held by their former incumbents.[5] The Communist Party, moreover, had revived, following a ruling by the Constitutional Court that the ban on its activity had been illegal (the Court did accept it had been legitimate to suppress the party's central organs, which had usurped the Soviet government itself).[6] Several communist groupings, after the ban, had laid claim to the position and (still more so) to the property of the former CPSU; in February 1993 most of them came together to hold a second congress of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and to establish a broader grouping of parties across the former Soviet republics.[7] The new party claimed a membership of more than 600,000, making it by far the largest of the actors in the postcommunist system;[8] communist groupings, meanwhile, enjoyed substantial support in the opinion polls, and (with their allies) took about a third of the party-list seats in the State Duma elections in December 1993.[9]

In this article, drawing on a Russia-wide representative survey that was conducted in January and February 1992, we address three related issues that emerge from this complex experience. The first is: what did it mean to be a party member in the late communist period? How many were active members, and in what did their activity consist? How many read the party press, attended meetings, or took a part in political life in other ways? Secondly, we ask: how united was the CPSU in the late communist period? Did party members, compared with others, have similar views on the issues of the day? How did the views of those who left the party compare with those that remained? And thirdly, taking account of the fragility of democratic institutions in early postcommunist Russia, we examine the views of those who define themselves as current party members on economic change and political democracy. The Communist Party, as we have noted, accounted for the largest proportion of the limited membership of all political parties in postcommunist Russia; and a further

[5] *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 4 March 1992, p. 2.

[6] *Kuranty*, 1 December 1992, p. 1.

[7] *Pravda*, 16 February 1993, pp. 1–2, and (for the wider association) *Pravda*, 30 March 1993, p. 2. On these developments see Ya. G. Ermakov *et al.*, 'Kommunisticheskoe dvizhenie v period zapreta: ot KPSS k KP RF', *Kentavr*, no. 3 (1993), 65–80; and Peter Lentini, 'Post-CPSU Communist Political Formations', *Journal of Communist Studies*, 8 (1993), 280–92.

[8] *Pravda*, 2 April 1993, p. 2.

[9] According to an unpublished survey conducted in December 1992 the Democratic party had the most widespread popular support (17.8 per cent viewed it 'positively'), but the two main successor parties to the CPSU enjoyed 23.1 per cent support between them. See Institut prikladnoi politiki, 'Politicheskie partii Rossii' (Moscow, 1993, typescript). The survey was based upon interviews with 1,500 respondents in four Russian regions; a short report appeared in *Moskovskie novosti*, no. 12 (1993), p. 9A. In the December 1993 elections the Communist Party of the Russian Federation took third place, with 13.6 per cent, but the communist-aligned Agrarians took a further 9 per cent and opposition parties together commanded about a third of the seats. For the results, see *Segodnya*, 28 December 1993, p. 1.

proportion were former members of the CPSU, whose views are also represented in our survey. The CPSU and its present or former members are accordingly a major influence upon the political direction of postcommunist Russia; more generally, the willingness of formerly hegemonic parties and their members to accept the 'rules of the game' is a central determinant of the complex process of transition from authoritarian to more pluralist forms of politics.[10]

THE PARTY IN LATE COMMUNIST RUSSIA

The attempt to reform the CPSU went back to the 19th Party Conference in 1988. Why, asked Gorbachev, had the CPSU, based as it was on democratic principles and popular support, been unable to resist the 'deformations of socialism' that had been associated with Stalin's cult of personality? And why, after this, had it limited itself to 'superficial changes', allowing social development to stagnate? The answer, Gorbachev suggested, was that there had been deformations in the party itself, involving the loss of its links with the wider society and the end of many 'democratic Bolshevik traditions'. The whole party, it was clear, needed to change its methods of work, from ordinary branches up to the Central Committee. Members and branches had lost their ability to influence party policy. The full-time apparatus had become dominant, sometimes even corrupt, and democratic centralism had become bureaucratic centralism, based upon directives and commands.[11] The Conference, in its concluding resolutions, agreed with Gorbachev that a 'profound democratization' of party life was necessary. Branches should have more autonomy. Membership should be determined by the moral and political qualities of the applicant rather than by centrally determined quotas. Party meetings should be more open, and less dominated by officials. Central Committee members should be able to play a more active part in the formulation of party policy. More records of party meetings should be published. And – a matter of 'prime importance' – all posts up to Central Committee level should be filled by secret and competitive ballot for a maximum of two five-year terms.[12]

The process of change was still continuing, as the party entered the last years of its existence; but it was already clear that a start had been made in a process of democratization that was intended to shift power from party officials to ordinary members. Competitive elections to party posts had in fact begun in 1987; by the end of the year more than a hundred local secretaries had been chosen on this basis.[13] In late 1988 the Central Committee approved the

[10] See, for instance, Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), chap. 4.

[11] *Materialy XIX Vsesoyuznoi konferentsii 28 iyunya – 1 iyulya 1988 goda* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1988), pp. 70–2.

[12] *Materialy XIX Vsesoyuznoi konferentsii*, pp. 124–6.

[13] *Pravda*, 10 February 1987, p. 2; *Partiinaya zhizn'*, no. 11 (1988), p. 15.

formation of six new commissions on party affairs, ideology, social and economic policy, agriculture, international affairs and law reform, all of them headed by a senior member of the leadership. In October 1990 the commissions were reorganized and extended, effectively superseding the Central Committee Secretariat.[14] The Central Committee apparatus was reduced in size and scope;[15] and more information began to be published about party affairs, particularly through the revived Central Committee journal *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*. In February 1990 the party agreed to surrender its constitutional monopoly, or more accurately to acknowledge that it no longer existed.[16] At the 28th Congress, in July 1990, there were still more significant moves to democratize the party's own operation. Members, for instance, could for the first time be religious believers[17] and they were given the right to form 'platforms', if not organized factions. The rights of minorities were strengthened, and 'horizontal' structures, of a kind that had previously been regarded as incompatible with democratic centralism, were explicitly endorsed.[18]

This was still, by 1991, some distance from the 'updated CPSU', working through parliament as well as workplaces, allowing 'total freedom of debate', and co-operating with other 'progressive' social and political forces, for which Gorbachev had called in his opening address. For a start, the party had been restructuring itself rather more slowly than other public institutions. As a Central Committee official told *Pravda* in early 1989, district committees still kept their records secret, and the rank and file were 'walled off' from their activities.[19] More than a thousand local party secretaries had been elected on a competitive basis, but this was only 8.6 per cent of the total; and at regional level only seven first secretaries had been elected on a competitive basis, just 1 per cent of the total. This compared with 74 per cent of the members of the Congress of People's Deputies who had been elected in March 1989 from a choice of candidates – 'a difference hardly in favour of the party'.[20] It was argued, indeed, that the Communist Party was the only institution not to democratize during the years of *perestroika*, remaining a 'Stalinist construction' as the society changed

[14] *Pravda*, 1 October 1988, p. 1 (the membership is listed in *Pravda*, 29 November 1988, pp. 1–2); *Materialy Tsentral'nogo komiteta KPSS 8–9 oktyabrya 1990 goda* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990), p. 201.

[15] *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, no. 1 (1989), pp. 81–9.

[16] It was in these terms that Gorbachev presented the decision: *Materialy Tsentral'nogo komiteta KPSS 5–7 fevralya 1990 goda* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990), pp. 9–10.

[17] Gorbachev drew attention to this change in his address to the July 1991 Central Committee plenary meeting: *Pravda*, 26 July 1991, p. 2. In a survey conducted in December 1992, 33 per cent of former CPSU members said that they believed in God, 40 per cent said they did not, and the remaining 27 per cent either offered no response or found the question difficult to answer (Institut prikladnoi politiki, 'Politicheskie partii Rossii').

[18] The amended party rules are in *Materialy XXVIII s"ezda Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soyuza* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990), pp. 108–24.

[19] Leon Onikov in *Pravda*, 2 January 1989, p. 2.

[20] *Pravda*, 10 July 1989, p. 2.

TABLE 1 *The Social Composition of the CPSU in 1990*

	Number	Percentage
Total membership	19,228,217	
Candidates	372,104	1.9
Women	5,813,610	30.2
Age groups		
≤20	38,553	0.2
21–25	645,091	3.4
26–30	2,001,936	10.4
31–40	5,002,311	26.0
41–50	3,682,076	19.1
51–60	3,844,212	20.0
>60	4,014,038	20.9
Education		
Higher	6,808,715	35.4
Incomplete higher	358,350	1.9
Secondary	8,605,207	44.7
Primary	1,154,880	6.0
Less than primary	54,570	0.3
Employment status		
Workers	5,313,524	27.6
Collective farmers	1,466,361	7.6
White-collar staff	7,793,048	40.5
Students	101,415	0.5
Pensioners and housewives	3,344,981	17.4
Others	1,208,888	6.3

Source: Adapted from *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, No. 4 (1990), pp. 113–15.

around it.[21] As studies of this kind suggested, there was a widening 'democratization gap' between the CPSU and the society it claimed to represent;[22] and as party leaders themselves accepted, the process of reform was advancing 'very slowly' in the CPSU's own branches.[23]

Not simply was the 'vanguard lagging'; it was also shrinking, particularly among the social groups whose interests it was supposed to represent. The rate of increase in CPSU membership dropped in 1988 to a scarcely measurable 0.1 per cent, and then in 1989 membership actually fell, for the first time since the 1950s (the size and composition of party membership, as they stood at the

[21] Onikov in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 26 March 1993, p. 2; similarly in *Argumenty i fakty*, 1992, no. 28, pp. 1, 4.

[22] *Pravda*, 2 January 1989, p. 2.

[23] Vladimir Ivashko in *Pravda*, 2 February 1991, p. 2.

beginning of this process of decline, are set out in Table 1).[24] The fall continued into 1990 and 1991, with the party losing about a quarter of its members over a period of eighteen months.[25] The proportion of industrial workers among those leaving the party was particularly high;[26] so too was the proportion of younger members, leaving a membership that was composed 'predominantly of bureaucrats and intellectuals'.[27] Those who remained within the party became increasingly uncertain of their membership, according to contemporary surveys;[28] and they became increasingly reluctant to part with their membership dues, which had in any case been reduced by the 28th Congress. By October 1990 more than a million members were behind with their payments, and a 'regime of severe economy' had to be instituted.[29] At the same time the party press, which had previously contributed to central funds, lost subscribers and began to run at a loss; *Pravda* alone lost about 70 per cent of its subscribers in the course of 1990.[30] By the summer of 1991 expenditure was running at almost twice the level of party income.[31]

An increasing level of non-payment was in turn related to a collapse of discipline in an organization that had once prided itself on its 'monolithic unity'. There were grass-roots revolts against local leaderships throughout the winter of 1989 and early 1990: in Volgograd and Tyumen', in Voroshilovgrad and Donetsk, in Kostroma and Cheboksary, in Ufa and Sverdlovsk.[32] There were increasingly open divisions among the membership at large, and even factions. For writers like the jurist Boris Kurashvili, in 1989, there were at least two parties within the CPSU, one of 'democratic socialism' and one of 'communist construction'.[33] For the playwright Mikhail Shatrov there were three, four or five parties within the CPSU in early 1990;[34] and for the then director of the Higher Party School, Vyacheslav Shostakovsky, there were as many as eight distinct tendencies within the party, including a 'silent majority'.[35] The months before the 28th Congress, in early 1990, saw the formation of organized and co-ordinated groupings of this kind, including the Democratic Platform – which favoured a parliamentary rather than a vanguard party – and the Marxist

[24] See Philip Hanson and Elizabeth Teague, 'Soviet Communist Party loses members', *Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe Report on the USSR*, 18 May 1990, pp. 1–3.

[25] *Pravda*, 26 July 1991, p. 2.

[26] *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, 1991, no. 3, pp. 14–15.

[27] Harasymiw, 'Changes in the Party's Composition', p. 133.

[28] *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, no. 8 (1989), p. 8.

[29] *Pravda*, 12 October 1990, p. 3, and (for 'severe economy') *Pravda*, 12 March 1990, p. 3.

[30] *Argumenty i fakty*, no. 48 (1990), p. 1.

[31] *Pravda*, 29 July 1991, p. 2.

[32] See respectively *Izvestiya*, 28 January 1990, p. 4, and 19 January 1990, p. 3; *Pravda*, 15 February 1990, p. 2, 26 February 1990, p. 3, 1 March 1990, p. 2, 11 February 1990, p. 2, and 13 February 1990, p. 3.

[33] See Yu. Burtin, ed., *Pul's Reform* (Moscow: Progress, 1989), p. 71.

[34] *Pravda*, 1 February 1990, p. 2.

[35] *Politicheskeskoe obrazovanie*, no. 18 (1990), p. 6.

Platform, which favoured a stronger emphasis upon working-class interests.[36] The republican party organizations of Lithuania, Georgia and Moldova left the CPSU entirely; the other Baltic party organizations split into pro-Moscow and independent sections; and in a further variation, several regional party organizations – among them the Komi and Bashkir – formally arrogated to themselves the status of republican parties.[37]

Party members were accordingly in a state of some confusion during the last months and years of communist rule. The most fundamental problem, in the view of delegates to the 28th Congress, was the lack of a clear vision of the kind of society the party was attempting to construct.[38] At the same time there was little agreement among party members about the nature of the policies that party and state leaderships were promoting. Members, for a start, were almost equally divided on the merits of communism: 38 per cent (in a 1991 survey) were in favour, but 40 per cent against it.[39] Party members were just as divided on the private ownership of land, with 46 per cent in favour and almost as many opposed. The repressive action that had been taken in the Baltic republics in early 1991 was supported by 33 per cent of members (who attributed the difficulties to the unconstitutional action of the republican authorities), but opposed by 35 per cent. So far as the party itself was concerned, 40 per cent supported a reorganization on federal lines, with nearly as many (39 per cent) against any changes of this nature.[40] Was it one or two distinct parties that had met at the April 1991 Central Committee plenum, asked a member of the Russian party's Central Committee? And would it not be better to formalize the divisions that clearly existed, acknowledging that too high a price had been paid for the 'sham unity' of the late communist period?[41]

CPSU MEMBERSHIP AND ITS SOCIAL BACKGROUND

We begin our analysis of party membership in the late communist and early postcommunist period by examining its size, level of activism and social composition (see Table 2).[42] In total, 12 per cent of those interviewed said they

[36] *Pravda*, 29 July 1991, p. 3.

[37] On the developments see Hill, 'The CPSU', pp. 217–35, and Rees, ed., *Soviet Communist Party*, pp. 20–4.

[38] *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, no. 8 (1990), p. 133.

[39] *Novoe vremya*, no. 12 (1991), p. 13.

[40] *Pravda*, 26 February 1991, p. 3.

[41] *Izvestiya*, 24 May 1991, p. 4.

[42] The data are from the 1992 New Russia Barometer survey, collected by the All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion between 26 January and 25 February 1992. The sample was based upon the urban population aged 16 years and over, resident in the Russian Federation. The survey was conducted by means of personal interviews; the effective response rate was 82.9 per cent. The total sample size was 2,106, weighted by education to reflect the national population. A fuller account of the survey and the other results that were obtained is provided in Irina Boeva and Viacheslav Shironin, *Russians between State and Market: The Generations Compared* (Glasgow: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, SPP 205, 1992).

TABLE 2 *CPSU Membership, Timing of Resignation and Level of Activism**

Membership		Timing of resignation†		Level of activism‡	
Member	12	After August 1991	30	≥ One day per week	22
(Current)	(2)	January-August 1991	23	Few hours a week	25
(Previous)	(10)	1985–90	39	≤ One hour per week	28
Never a member	88	Before 1985	8	Inactive	25
Total	100	Total	100	Total	100
(*N*)	(2,106)	(*N*)	(214)	(*N*)	(251)

* The questions were: 'Have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?'; [If left the Communist Party] 'when was that?'; [If member] 'about how much time did you spend on party work?'

† Estimated only for previous members.

‡ Estimated for past and present members combined.

Source: 1992 New Russian Barometer Survey.

were or had been CPSU members, a figure that corresponds closely to the proportion of adults that were members of the party at the end of the 1980s.[43] And although the party was no longer legal at the time of the survey, about 2 per cent of those who were asked still identified themselves as members. Membership, by this time, could clearly exist in an affective sense only, as decrees adopted immediately after the attempted coup of August 1991 had suspended all party activities throughout the Russian Federation and placed party finances and assets, including buildings, under the control of local soviets.[44] In November 1991, in a further series of decrees, the party was suppressed entirely, its organizational structures were 'disbanded', and its property was transferred into state ownership.[45]

Among those who had resigned their party membership, in our survey, just under one in three had done so following the failed coup, and around a quarter had resigned in the six months immediately prior to the coup. In total, then, the party lost more than half of its membership among the survey population in the period between January 1991 and the time when the survey was conducted, in February 1992. A significant proportion (39 per cent) had resigned between

[43] The actual figure for CPSU membership in the unweighted data is considerably higher. However, we have weighted the data by education, to make it more representative of the general population, and since education is highly correlated with party membership (see Table 2) this necessarily reduces the estimates.

[44] *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 27 August 1991, p. 3, and *Izvestiya*, 30 August 1991, p. 2.

[45] *Izvestiya*, 5 November 1991, p. 1 (funds frozen), and *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 9 November 1991, p. 2.

1985 and 1990, the years of *perestroika*; only 8 per cent said they had left in the years before 1985. Finally, the data show that the CPSU was able to rely on a comparatively high level of activism among its members. Only a quarter could be considered completely inactive, while three-quarters gave at least an hour or more every week to party affairs. Indeed, no fewer than 22 per cent of our sample were in the party's part-time service, devoting at least one day a week to party work. These are very high levels of activism in comparative terms.[46]

The data enable us to examine the social composition of the CPSU, and to evaluate the social characteristics of activists, using a wider range of variables than has hitherto been available. Table 3 shows that ordinary party members, in our survey as in the official statistics reported in Table 1, were disproportionately male. Activists, however, were much more evenly balanced: this accords with other evidence that (for instance) women were more likely than men to be members of the Komsomol, and that unmarried women were more likely to be politically active than their male counterparts.[47] Party members (but not necessarily activists) were also more likely to have had a higher education than non-members: about a third of members and activists had been to college or university, about three times as high as the proportion of graduates among the society as a whole.[48] The survey also enables us to go further in examining socio-economic status, a matter on which official party statistics were notably uninformative. Members, clearly, were more affluent than their non-party colleagues, with a total family income of around 400 roubles a month more than non-members. They were also better provided with consumer goods. Measured by the possession of three such goods – a car, a telephone and a *dacha* – party members were about one and a half times as likely to possess them as their non-party counterparts. In terms of their religious beliefs, party members were twice as likely to declare themselves non-believers as their counterparts outside party ranks, although believers (in fact) just outnumbered non-believers among the membership as a whole. Among the party membership, activism (judged by those who worked several hours a week on party business) was similarly dependent upon education and age. Activists, more generally, were very similar in their characteristics to the membership as a whole: appropriate, perhaps, in a party that demanded a high level of active commitment from all its members.

[46] See, for instance, Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, *Labour's Grassroots: The Politics of Party Membership* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[47] See V. G. Mordkovich, 'Obshchestvenno-politicheskaya aktivnost' trudyashchikhsya' (avtoreferat doktorskoi dissertatsii, Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii institut, 1974), p. 25 (Komsomol); and *Trud i lichnost' pri sotsializme*, vyp. 2 (Perm': Permskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1973), p. 46, and V. N. Ermuratsky, ed., *Sotsial'naya aktivnost' rabotnikov promyshlennogo predpriyatiya* (Kishinev: Shtiintsa, 1973), p. 110.

[48] In the early 1980s, for instance, 76 in every 1,000 members of the population aged 10 or over had a higher education, or 110 for every 1,000 members of the labour force (*Narodnoe khozyaistvo SSSR 1922–1982: Yubileinyi statisticheskii ezhegodnik* (Moscow: Finansy i statistika, 1982), p. 42.

TABLE 3 *The Social Composition of CPSU Membership*

Percentages of each group, unless otherwise stated	All members	Activists only	Never members
Gender (male)	60**	50	43
Age			
≤ 20	0	0	8
21–25	2**	1**	11
26–30	7*	6*	12
31–40	26	22	23
41–50	19**	18	13
51–60	24**	28*	16
> 60	22	25	18
Ethnic Russian	94	95	92
Resident of European Russia†	69*	71*	61
Resident of Moscow, St Petersberg	15	16	13
Education			
Higher	33**	33**	12
Incomplete higher	3	3	3
Secondary	53**	57	62
Primary	6	6	7
Less than primary	5**	1*	16
Family income (mean, thousands of roubles per month)	2.5**	2.4*	2.1
Consumer goods (mean, 0 to 3)‡	1.5**	1.5**	1.0
Religion			
Believer	40**	39**	54
Non-believer	37**	40**	18
Difficult to answer	23	21*	28
(*N*)	(255)	(116)	(716)

** Statistically different from never members at $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

† Defined as residence in the northwestern and central regions, including Volga-Vyatskii, Volga, Moscow, Udmurt, Vladimir and Cherepovets regions or republics.

‡ Car, telephone, *dacha*.

Source: As for Table 2.

EXPLAINING THE DECLINE OF THE CPSU

Who left the CPSU during the last months, and why? Surveys conducted in late 1990, based upon interviews with those who left and a study of their personal files, suggested that increasing numbers were leaving the party voluntarily: 35 per cent had left 'on the basis of a personal declaration' in 1989, but more than twice as many (74 per cent) left on the same basis in 1990. The typical leaver, at the same time, had changed relatively little: for the most part they were male industrial workers aged between 30 and 50 with a secondary education, who had been in the party for ten years or more, and who for the most part had suffered no disciplinary sanctions. Most of those who left had begun to question their membership in 1989 or 1990 (41 per cent alone had begun to do so after the 28th Party Congress in July 1990). The great majority, equally, had no doubt they had taken the right decision. What reasons did they give for leaving? For 26 per cent of the former members that were asked it was a 'lack of belief in the CPSU as an agency of political direction', including dissatisfaction with the quality of its leadership. For another 26 per cent it was the 'lack of real value from their personal participation in party work'; and for a further 25 per cent it was their 'reluctance to remain in the same party as unworthy people', including corrupt officials. Another 17 per cent (more than one response could be given) were disillusioned with *perestroika*, and 14 per cent were disenchanted with socialism itself.[49]

Clearly, in early 1992, it was difficult to establish why individuals had left the CPSU (or chosen not to do so) at an earlier point in their biography. Using cross-sectional data to ascertain why individuals made choices of this kind is fraught with difficulties, methodological as well as conceptual, since respondents are being asked to recollect their feelings at an earlier and often comparatively remote point in time. Respondents may have difficulty in recalling their real reasons for adopting a particular course of action; in other cases, they may project their current feelings on to their past actions, or present reasons that have been vindicated by the passage of time. In still other cases they may wish to conceal their true motives (for instance, that they had joined the party to advance their careers and left when membership was no longer associated with this kind of advantage). One method of ascertaining why respondents might have left the CPSU was to ask them their opinions of party members, using this as an indirect means of establishing their own feelings about the party and possible reasons for leaving. The survey contained a battery of ten items designed to tap these feelings, which were asked only of current or former party members; these results appear in Table 4.

In general all party members, including activists, were inclined to mention images of their fellow members that were associated with careerist motives of

[49] Akademiya obshchestvennykh nauk TsK KPSS, Tsentr sotsiologicheskikh issledovanii, *Politicheskaya sotsiologiya: Informatsionnyi byulleten'*, no. 3 (1991), pp. 14–16 (we are grateful to Simon Clarke for making this source available to us).

TABLE 4 *CPSU Members' Images of Communists**

Percentage of each group mentioning:	All members	Activists only
Altruism		
Trying to help other people	20	30
Intelligent, good specialists	9	15
Idealists	5	5
Compulsion		
Had to join to get job, promotion	51	47
Had to join to participate in social activities	33	35
Used party for own purposes	33	32
Negativism		
Dishonest	12	7
Interfere in other's business	5	3
Uneducated, unprofessional	3	3
(*N*)	(255)	(116)

* The question was 'Here are phrases that are sometimes used to describe former party members. Which do you think fits most?'
Source: As for Table 2.

some kind, particularly the view that members 'had to join to get a job or promotion', which was mentioned by 51 per cent of the total CPSU subsample. However, significant numbers also suggested that membership was necessary to engage in social activities, and a similar number took the view that members used the party for their own purposes. Altruistic images of party members were less frequently mentioned, although one in five thought that members were 'trying to help other people'; very few, however, considered that intelligence or idealism were accurate descriptions of party members. Comparatively few mentioned explicitly negative images, such as dishonesty (12 per cent) or a lack of education or professionalism (3 per cent). As we might expect, activists were more likely to see the party in a favourable light than were the membership as a whole, but in general the differences are not large. The two factors that related most closely to the decision to leave were age (younger respondents were more likely to have left the party than older members, net of other factors) and religious belief. In terms of the timing of such a decision, those with a higher education were significantly more likely than former members as a whole to have resigned in the early 1990s rather than the 1980s: an indication, perhaps, of the close association that still existed between party membership, education, occupation and material advantages.

ECONOMIC CHANGE AND POLITICAL REFORM

Judged against the various other social groups in early postcommunist Russia, former CPSU members had an important – perhaps even crucial – role in the process of economic and political reform. Although about one in ten of the adult population were current or former CPSU members, this proportion increased significantly among those in leading political and economic positions. Indeed it was appropriate, for some scholars, to speak of a '*neonomenklatura*'.[50] In the Russian presidential administration, by 1994, fully 75 per cent were former members of the communist ruling group; 74.3 per cent of the Russian government, and as many as 82.3 per cent of the local elite, were from the same origins.[51] In the wider society, about a third of all those with a higher education, and a comparable proportion of those in professional positions, were current or former party members.[52] In short, the economic and political opinions of CPSU members were likely to have a disproportionate impact upon the process of reform in postcommunist Russia, whether communist parties were legal or (as in 1991 and again in 1993) temporarily suspended. To evaluate their likely influence in this process, in the concluding part of this article we consider the attitudes of current and former party members to economic reform and their views on the development of the Russian political system more generally.

Those who still regarded themselves as CPSU members, it emerges, were the most likely to oppose economic reform and to support the collectivist principles that obtained in the communist period (see Table 5). Activists were significantly less likely than non-members to prefer high pay and risk to job security, or to prefer entrepreneurship to state ownership and management of the economy. Nevertheless, party activists expressed the same levels of support as did others for individual effort and responsibility in the economy. The divisions were greater when respondents were asked about three different types of economic system – capitalism, socialism and Marxism–Leninism. Once again, party activists were much more likely to identify with socialism and Marxism–Leninism, around four out of ten giving them a positive assessment as compared with one in four among those who had never joined its ranks. In general, the results indicate that it is former party activists – amounting to about 5 per cent of the population – who are distinctive in their economic attitudes, although the differences (again) are not substantial.

Liberalization of the economy is one measure of reform; equally important are opinions about the political system. To what extent are current or former

[50] *Argumenty i fakty*, 1994, no. 35, p. 3.

[51] Ol'ga Kryshtanovskaya, 'Transformatsiya staroi nomenklatury v novuyu rossiiskuyu elitu' (unpublished manuscript, Moscow, 1994), Table 9.

[52] In January 1990, 6.8 million party members (35.4 per cent of the total) had a completed higher education (*Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, no. 4 (1990), p. 114); this compared with 20.2 million within the working population as a whole (*Narodnoe khozyaistvo SSSR v 1989 godu* (Moscow: Finansy i statistika, 1990), p. 187).

TABLE 5 *Economic Attitudes Among CPSU Members*†

	All members	Activists only	Never members
Individualism versus collectivism			
Prefers high pay, risk job security	55	47**	59
Prefers individual effort to equal income	84*	81*	88
Prefers entrepreneurs to state ownership	60**	55**	67
Prefers individual to state responsibility	51	54	49
Prefers individual to state economic decision making	35	32	33
Capitalism versus socialism			
Positive view of capitalism	21**	17**	25
Positive view of socialism	40**	39**	23
Positive view of Marxist–Leninism	33**	39**	15
(*N*)	(255)	(116)	(1,716)

** Statistically different from never members at $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, two-tailed.
† The questions were: 'People hold different views about the economy. For each pair of statements, which is closer to your view?'; 'We often hear the following words. What feelings do they evoke?'
Source: As for Table 2.

communist party members likely to support or oppose the political changes that have been taking place since December 1991? And are they likely to help or to hinder the development of more open and accountable institutions of government? Impressionistic evidence would suggest the latter, at least to the extent that the August 1991 conspirators were party members of senior standing; the resistance that was offered to Yeltsin's economic reforms by the Russian parliament, in which it was very well represented, tended in addition to support the impression that current and former party members were strongly opposed to many of the central elements in the postcommunist programme. At the same time the process of democratization and market reform had been initiated by the CPSU itself, and the draft Party Programme, approved by the Central Committee in the summer of 1991, explicitly committed the party to a mixed economy based upon a variety of forms of property, free prices and full integration into the international economy, as well as to 'democracy and freedom in all their various manifestations'.[53]

One approach to ascertaining opinions about democratic institutions is obviously to ask respondents direct questions about them. This, in practice, leads to a number of difficulties. One is that many respondents may not contest broadly

[53] *Kommunist*, no. 12 (1991), pp. 8, 4.

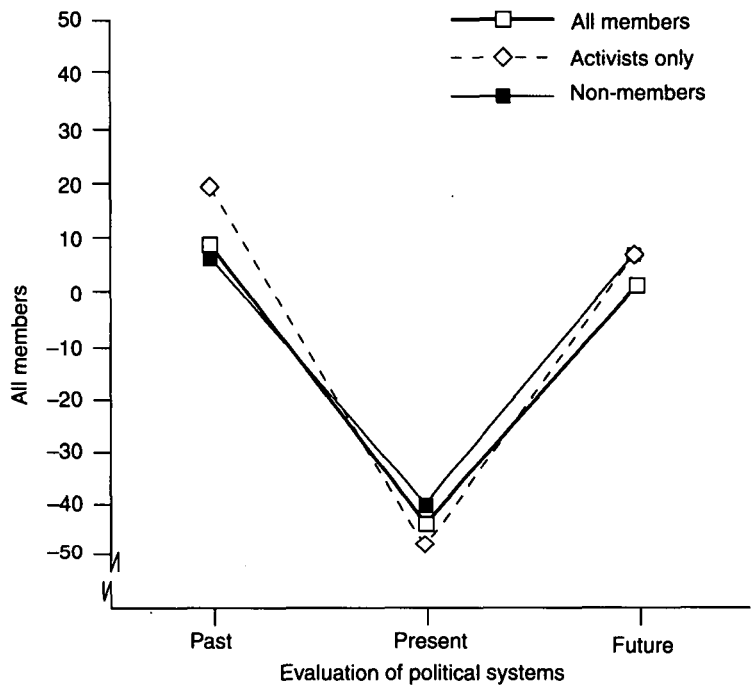

Fig. 1. Evaluation of past, present and future political systems, by CPSU members and non-members. The questions were: 'Here is a scale for ranking systems of government. The top, plus 100, is for the best and the bottom, minus 100, is the worst. Where on the scale would you put our system of government before perestroika*/present system of governing/our system of governing in five years' time?'*
Source: As for Table 2.

democratic principles in a survey interview, so that the questions simply elicit the 'expected' responses. A second possible difficulty is that democracy is generally associated with economic reform; which is considerably less popular because of the economic hardships that have followed in its wake. The alternative approach, used here, is to ask respondents to evaluate past, present and future political systems on a graduated 'heaven and hell' scale. This has the advantage that it avoids direct questions about democracy, while still ascertaining opinions about present and future change, and at the same time it provides a benchmark against which retrospectively to compare these opinions. Figure 1 presents in graph form trends in support for these three very different political systems among CPSU members and non-members.

Opinions, as we might expect, are divided about the communist system before the *perestroika* of the Gorbachev years. The average for the total sample is narrowly positive – a mean of +7 on a scale running from −100 to

+ 100 – but this obscures a greater degree of support for the past regime from CPSU members (+ 9) and, more particularly, from previous activists (+ 19). There is, however, little ambiguity about the current postcommunist regime: it attracted generally negative evaluations from all groups, CPSU members in particular rating it at − 45 on the scale. Finally, although all our respondents expressed a (narrowly) positive view of the future regime, in no case was the future evaluation higher than the evaluation of the past communist regime. Most respondents were, in that sense, pessimistic about the political prospects for a postcommunist Russia. Party members were nevertheless more optimistic than those who had never joined its ranks.

The differences between party activists and the party membership as a whole suggest that, although former members will be influential, CPSU membership by itself is likely to play a very limited part in shaping the political direction of postcommunist Russia. The mass public, from the late 1980s onwards, steadily lost confidence in the ability of the CPSU to take the country out of its crisis, and blamed its leadership for economic decline and political fragmentation.[54] But they were much less likely to blame the mass membership, or (for instance) to attach any importance to the fact of party membership in their choice of a future president.[55] The CPSU, for its part, was a massive presence within the society that it dominated, reflecting its divisions and expressing them in open and bitter party debates from the late 1980s onwards. The party, some of its members suggested, was 'like membership of the Anglican church for the average Englishman', a status that was difficult to avoid in public life but one that conveyed relatively little about the beliefs and values of its members.[56] After 1991, these different views about the future of their society found expression in a variety of competing parties, and outside politics altogether; 'current' and 'former' party members, as they identified themselves in our survey, continued their dispute but no longer did so within the artificial unity of a single and monopolistic CPSU.

Party members, as our survey has shown, did differ in their underlying political philosophies from the non-party majority. These differences, however, were almost entirely confined to the small minority who in the early 1990s regarded themselves as current members. Former activists and other members generally diverged very little in their responses from those that had never been within the party's ranks. When asked about more specific policies there were

[54] In December 1989, 23 per cent of Russians 'completely trusted' the CPSU; by late 1991, just after the coup, the level of trust was down to 2.3 per cent (*Izvestiya*, 1 October 1991, p. 9). And who was responsible for the crisis in which the Soviet Union found itself at the end of the 1980s? For 11.4 per cent it was 'the people' and for 17.4 per cent 'the party, including its rank and file'; but 29.2 per cent blamed 'the current party leadership', and 37.1 per cent 'former leaders' (*Obshchestvennoe mnenie v tsifrakh*, 10, No. 17 (April 1990), p. 17).

[55] See, for instance, *Mir mnenii i mneniya o mire*, 10, No. 76 (September 1993), a Russia-wide survey of the desired attributes of a future president.

[56] *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 20 February 1991, pp. 1, 3.

few if any significant differences, even among those who regarded themselves as current members. In terms of their evaluation of the communist past, members were almost as negative as non-members; and they shared the generally more optimistic view that was taken of the prospects for a postcommunist administration, at least in terms of its social and economic performance. Party members were a cross-section of their society in the late communist period; in the postcommunist era they reflect the diversity of opinion that is characteristic of their fellow citizens.